

Dealing with withdrawal

Withdrawal from nicotine has 2 parts -- the physical and the mental. The physical symptoms, while annoying, are not life-threatening. Nicotine replacement and other medicines can help reduce many of these physical symptoms. Most smokers find that the bigger challenge is the mental part of quitting.

If you have been smoking for any length of time, smoking has become linked with nearly everything you do -- waking up in the morning, eating, reading, watching TV, and drinking coffee, for example. It will take time to "un-link" smoking from these activities. This is why, even if you are using a nicotine replacement, you may still have strong urges to smoke.

Rationalizations are sneaky

One way to overcome these urges or cravings is to notice and identify *rationalizations* as they come up. A rationalization is a mistaken thought that seems to make sense to you at the time, but the thought is not based on reality. If you choose to believe in such a thought, it can serve as a way to justify smoking. If you have tried to quit before, you will probably recognize many of these common rationalizations:

- I'll just have one to get through this rough spot.
- Today is not a good day. I'll quit tomorrow.
- It's my only vice.
- How bad is smoking, really? Uncle Harry smoked all his life and he lived to be over 90.
- Air pollution is probably just as bad.
- You've got to die of something.
- Life is no fun without smoking.

You probably can add more to the list. As you go through the first few days without smoking, write down any rationalizations as they come up and recognize them for what they are: messages that can trick you into going back to smoking. Look out for them, because they always show up when you're trying to quit. After you write down the idea, let it go from your mind. Be ready with a distraction, a plan of action, and other ways to re-direct your thoughts to something else.

Staying quit (maintenance)

Staying quit is the final, longest, and most important stage of the process. You can use the same methods to stay quit as you did to help you through withdrawal. Think ahead to those times when you may be tempted to smoke, and plan on how you will use other ways to cope with these situations.

More dangerous, perhaps, are the unexpected strong desires to smoke that can sometimes happen months, or even years after you've quit. To get through these without relapse, try these:

- Review your reasons for quitting and think of all the benefits to your health, your finances, and your family.
- Remind yourself that there is no such thing as just one cigarette -- or even one puff.
- Ride out the desire to smoke. It will go away, but do not fool yourself into thinking you can have just one.
- Avoid alcohol. Drinking lowers your chance of success.
- If you are worried about gaining weight, put some energy into eating a healthy diet and staying active with exercise.

Recovering from slips

What if you do smoke? The difference between a slip and a relapse is within your control. A slip is a one-time mistake that is quickly corrected -- a relapse is going back to smoking. You can use the slip as an excuse to go back to smoking, or you can look at what went wrong and renew your commitment to staying away from smoking for good.

Even if you do relapse, try not to get too discouraged. Very few people are able to quit for good on the first try. In fact, it takes most people many attempts before quitting for good. What's important is figuring out what helped you when you tried to quit and what worked against you. You can then use this information to make a stronger attempt at quitting the next time.

Source: American Cancer Society
www.cancer.org